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TWO CONVENTIONS OF THE ELIZABETHAN STAGE

In our attempts to re-create imaginatively an Elizabethan theatrical performance, the two doors leading to the front stage have received relatively little attention. On the mediaeval stage, with its multiple setting, the places of entrance of the various characters were of great significance, and on the Elizabethan stage, which developed from it, this significance would naturally continue. Such evidence as there is for the use of locality signs above the doors,¹ and the contemporary allusions to the care exercised by the Elizabethan actors in making their entrances through the proper doors, speak for this importance.

The usual Elizabethan play, however, does not easily lend itself to any scheme of locality boards yet suggested. Thus *The Merchant of Venice*, though limited in location to Belmont and Venice, shifts its scene thirteen times between the two. It might possibly be arranged for all entrances and exits in Belmont to be made through, say, the right door, and those in Venice through the left, but not much would be gained by this, and exits where people separate, like that, for instance, at the end of II, 2, could be made more effectively by different doors than by the one in this case hypothetically marked Venice. Still, even if we are unable to explain the complete scheme of door significance, at least two conventional uses may be noted.² To the first, so far as I am aware, attention has not previously been called.

¹ The most complete account of the locality boards is to be found in Mr. W. J. Lawrence's *Elizabethan Playhouse*, Vol. I, "Title and Locality Boards on the Pre-Restoration Stage." Would it be too fanciful to notice in this connection the tablets above the doors in the Inigo Jones sketch of the interior of a theater, which Professor Adams identifies with the Cockpit-in-Court, built by Charles I in 1632 or 1633? These tablets as pictured (*Shakespearean Playhouses*, p. 396) bear no inscriptions but offer an excellent place for locality boards. The picture of the Theatro Olympico at Vicenza, which is said to have inspired Jones, shows no such tablets (*ibid.*, p. 399).

² A third conventional use of the doors was common—that indicated by such directions as "Enter at one door . . . at another door," "on opposite sides," "severally," and the like. Sometimes such entrances implied that the persons entering came from different places. Thus in *Coriolanus*, I, 4-10, the directions observe carefully the use of one of the doors—presumably that from the rear stage—as the entrance to Corioli, and of the other doors as leading to the battlefield and the Roman camp. (Throughout this note I refer to the directions of the folio, not of modern editions, which often, as in this instance, hopelessly confuse the staging; thus all these scenes are before Corioli, at a greater or less distance from the gates.) Very often in the plays persons enter at opposite

On the Elizabethan stage, as we usually picture it, at least two doors are always visible, and when the rear stage curtains are opened at least three; but there are several scenes in Elizabethan plays in which the audience is asked to imagine that but one door leads to the stage. An illustration or two will make this convention clear:

Hamlet, V, 2: When the queen drinks the poisoned cup, Hamlet cries, "Ho, let the door be locked."

Richard II, V, 2: Aumerle, asking pardon from Bolingbroke, requests permission "to turn the key, That no man enter till my tale be done."

Othello, IV, 2: Emelia is told to "shut the door, Cough and cry 'hem' if anybody come." After Othello calls her in again, the scene continues, first between Desdemona and Iago, then between Iago and Roderigo, thus seeming in a less private place. In V, 2, the convention of the single door is more strikingly illustrated. Montano's direction, "Come, guard the door without; let him not pass," shows the imagined arrangement of the scene.

In none of these scenes but the last is the rear stage obviously employed, and the single door used as the entrance is almost surely—because of its greater effectiveness—one of the front stage doors. Nor is any other door made use of anywhere in the scene; the convention is observed in the action. Other examples might be cited

doors to show that they are just meeting, a circumstance which justifies a bit of exposition. A familiar case is *Macbeth*, I, 2, where Duncan meets the sergeant and hears of Macbeth's bravery. In *Cymbeline*, III, 1, Cymbeline thus enters at one door and the ambassador from Rome at another, though Cymbeline's first speech is pretty abrupt for a first meeting. Perhaps this scene might better be cited as an illustration of the use of the separate entrance to emphasize visually the opposition of one party to another. In *Titus Andronicus*, I, 1, such opposing parties enter at different doors, but go out together to show their reconciliation. In *I Henry VI*, II, 1, the French fleeing before the English from Orleans are directed to enter "seuerall wayes" to suggest their confusion and surprise. In this case the significance of the different doors as leading to different localities is sacrificed to secure a greater dramatic effect. Indeed the English have probably entered only thirty lines before through these very doors to scale "the walls." In *III Henry VI*, II, 5, a son who has killed his father enters at one door, and, from the same battlefield but at another door, a father who has killed his son. Obviously the purpose is to make the contrast more striking. In one case at least this desire for effect through the use of opposite doors leads to a sort of conflict with the principal convention discussed in this paper. In *Twelfth Night*, II, 2, Viola and Malvolio enter at "seuerall doores," though Malvolio is supposed to be following her from Olivia's; indeed some modern editions so direct. But the Elizabethan stage manager saw a more effective situation in Malvolio's confronting rather than pursuing Viola, and arranged the scene accordingly. This is, however, only a sort of conflict. After the act intermission and the fifty lines of scene 1, the audience had probably forgotten at which door Viola and Malvolio had gone out, so that observance of the convention would have had no point.

even from Shakespeare's plays, but, as this usage can scarcely have affected the work of the playwrights except as it allowed such situations, we may pass to the second and more important of these conventions related to the doors. It is more important because it represents one of the methods available to Elizabethan dramatists for the solution of the problem of location, a problem always interesting in any sort of drama.

For all plays require some sort of imagined or realized background, and the sort of background furnished by the stage for which the dramatist writes largely conditions the form which this problem shall take for him. Thus, to the modern dramatist the problem is usually one of arranging his story before as few backgrounds as possible. Henry Arthur Jones has won commendation for his cleverness in *Mary Goes First*: the characters and not the playwright seem to be compelling the action to take place in the one room. Pinero's hand, on the contrary, is pretty obvious in *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*: Paula's visit to Aubrey in Act I requires considerable explanation, and Hugh's intrusion in Act III defies probability; a gentleman does not usually prowl about a strange country house at night just to catch a glimpse of a girl to whom he has only a little before said goodnight. The demand for cleverness and plausibility in securing unity of scene on our heavily set stage is of course perfectly justified; that is precisely what the problem of location means to the modern dramatist. But such standards have no possible application to Shakespeare; by them his finest achievements seem puerile. To him the problem of location did not involve the arrangement of his story to conform to some elaborate scheme of stage setting; his difficulty was rather now how to make clear to his audience what his location really was, and now, the scene over, how to destroy the significance he had built up and to show that his location had shifted, though often the stage picture remained the same.

And it was a real difficulty, though students have as yet paid slight attention to it. A few productions of little-known Elizabethan plays in the Elizabethan manner and without playbills would, I think, make it an obvious one. Editors in preparing modern texts of course depend largely upon textual allusions, but even with the text before them for repeated examination not infrequently make

mistakes. It is hardly possible that an audience however attentive would be able to catch these references. On the stage, to be sure, are other helps: properties, "business," costume, all can suggest the scene. In *The Merchant of Venice* the very people by their presence—Portia in Belmont, Shylock in Venice—usually settle the general location of the scenes without need of any other indication.

Often, however, something more is needed, some convention or set of conventions as easy to understand and as generally applicable as that of our own falling curtain. In this connection two methods of shifting the location may be referred to, even though they are not especially concerned with the doors. Both are pretty generally accepted and require only brief illustration. One is the indication of a journey by moving about the stage, an interesting survival from the multiple staging. In the Towneley play of *Abraham* a three days' journey is thus suggested in twenty lines. From the Shakespearean plays an example not usually noted occurs in *II Henry IV*, IV, 1, where (see the folio) the Archbishop and his friends do not, as modern editions direct, go out to meet Prince John but only move forward a little to indicate their advance to a place "just distance 'tween our armies." The other convention is that of showing a change of scene from one room to an adjacent one, or from outside to inside a house, tent, and the like, by opening the curtains of the rear stage, though there was in this, to the Elizabethan way of looking at the stage, scarcely a change of scene, since the front stage often retained its first significance. Thus in *Julius Caesar*, III, 1, Caesar first appears in the street and then goes into the senate house, and in IV, 2 and 3, the struggle between the Poet and soldiers takes place on the front stage, which throughout the scene represents the space before the tent of Brutus.

Many cases, however, could not be made clear by either of the two devices. For these I have previously¹ suggested another convention in the use of the doors: that exit and immediate re-entrance by a different door meant on the Elizabethan stage a change of scene. This is not a mere guess; a few precise directions show that it was certainly a custom of the stage. Perhaps the most familiar

¹ *Modern Philology*, III (1905), 75-76, and XII (1914), 252, note.

illustration is that from Middleton's *Changeling*: III, 1 concludes with De Flores leading Alonzo out, ostensibly to show him the fort. The quarto then says, "Exeunt at one door and enter at the other," and the new scene begins with the same men but supposedly in a different place. The imagined shift is all the more strikingly conventional because on the stage in both scenes there is a rapier hidden by De Flores before scene 1 began, but for use in scene 2. Similarly in *The English Traveller*, IV, 3 (Pearson's reprint, p. 66), Geraldine, having tried to sleep on a pallet, rises, "goes in at one doore, and comes out at another," and is supposed to be now in a different part of the house, though the pallet is still in sight. So too in *The Brazen Age* (p. 177) there is a precise direction to exit and re-enter to represent the crossing of a river, a throne being present in both scenes, and in *The Iron Age* (p. 379) another to suggest the Greeks' entrance into Troy. In only two cases known to me does such a direction occur when the action does not signify a shift of scene: in *The Spanish Tragedy*, III, 11, where the mad Hieronimo so exits and re-enters to indicate his suspicion of eavesdroppers; and in *Caesar and Pompey*, IV, 1, where Caesar is pursuing Pompey. Other persons remain on the stage in both scenes, a fact which sufficiently changes the significance to avoid any misunderstanding.

If these were the only plays from Shakespeare's period in which this usage occurs the convention would, though interesting, be scarcely important. But other situations may be cited where this convention would be useful, but which lack the precise directions, perhaps in some cases just because a few lines intervene, usually to indicate a slight lapse of time. Possible illustrations are numerous. I confine myself to a half dozen, all from Shakespeare's plays because such citations require less explanation.

One is to be found in *Hamlet*, I, 4 and 5, where the change of scene could scarcely be visually indicated in any other way. Hamlet in scene 4 has broken away from his friends "upon the platform" to follow the Ghost; they discuss the situation for five lines and then follow him. He re-enters—according to this convention, from the other door—with the Ghost. There is no hint that either scene is played in the rear stage or balcony; the use of different doors would make the change of scene clear.

The case of *Romeo and Juliet*, II, 1 and 2, a scene which has caused considerable discussion in pseudo-Elizabethan performances, is similar. Where is the wall to be placed which Juliet says is high and hard to climb, and which Romeo "o'er perched with love's light wing"? The actual accomplishment might prove less graceful on the stage, and a wall cutting the stage in two would be a nuisance. Of course the modern division into two scenes does not correspond to any change of setting in the original performance. The situation is an admittedly difficult one, but with this convention in mind might be imaged thus: Romeo enters, scene 1, from Capulet's, *left*, and presently exits there, drawn back by thoughts of Juliet. After a moment, to show that they do not meet him, his friends enter through this same door, and after looking for him in vain go out *right*, to show that they are leaving Capulet's. Then, after a moment's pause again, Romeo re-enters, *right*, thus showing that the scene has changed. This arrangement would suppose the wall off stage. The interval of forty lines between Romeo's exit and re-entrance and the absence of any direction for this exit and entrance make the case more doubtful than most.

This convention would be especially useful in making clear the shifts that modern editors feel it necessary to note by such directions as, "Another part of the forest," "Another room in the same," and the like. Sometimes, to be sure, this change of scene is of little consequence, or the playwright may not have imagined it at all, but not infrequently it does require indication.

Thus in *King John*, III, scene 2 is at Angiers on the battlefield. John is concerned about the safety of his mother, Elinor, and exits to find her; he immediately re-enters in scene 3 with her.

I Henry IV, V, 3, on the battlefield of Shrewsbury, concludes with Hal's throwing back at Falstaff the latter's "pistol" of a bottle of sack and hurrying on to the battle again. After a soliloquy of seven lines by Falstaff, Hal re-enters, wounded, with his father and others. The change of location here is perhaps not essential, but modern editors usually suppose one.

In *II Henry VI*, IV, a series of scenes picturing Jack Cade's march through London illustrates this convention admirably—not, however, at IV, 2, where modern editions show an exit and re-entry.

Instead, the corollary of this convention is here made use of—that exit and re-entrance by the *same* door show that the scene is not changed. The Staffords and their forces, after parleying with Cade, withdraw (l. 195); at line 202 one of Cade's men says of them, "They are all in order and march toward us." Cade orders, "Come, march, forward." The folio direction says: "Alarums to the fight wherein both the Staffords are slain. Enter Cade and the rest." We may imagine that the Staffords had entered where they went out, say *right*; Cade pursues them in the battle, *right*, re-entering there for what modern editions call scene 3, which closes, "Come, let's march towards London," and in which the exit should therefore be to the *right*. Scene 4 is with the king (60 lines), scene 5 in London before the Tower (13 lines). When Cade re-enters in scene 6, perhaps the audience would have forgotten where he went out; he could as well enter *left*, however, so that if they did remember they would not be confused, and exit *right* to show his progress toward London Bridge, and so on. Note especially the effective use at scenes 7–8; scene 7 is at Smithfield; Cade exits to go through London; scene 8 begins with his "Up Fish Street, down St. Magnus corner," etc.

One example may be cited of change of room scenes, *Macbeth*, III, 2 and 3. In scene 2 Macbeth dismisses the murderers; in scene 3, after seven lines of soliloquy by Lady Macbeth, he re-enters. Perhaps the scene is not supposed to change, but, if modern editors are right in assuming that it did, the change could hardly have been shown in any simpler way than by his re-entrance through a different door.

Act II of *Macbeth* suggests the corollary to this convention, already referred to, that entrance by the same door through which one went out means that the scene has not changed. This usually is of little consequence, as rarely could there be any question about it. But the custom of giving the doors a more or less definite significance in a scene or series of scenes is of a good deal of consequence. If in Act II the right door, for example, is supposed throughout the act to lead to Duncan's chamber, the left to the palace in general—Banquo's, Macbeth's, Malcolm's rooms—and the (uncurtained) rear stage door to be the outer gate, the whole act will be clearer and more effective

than if Banquo, for example, retired through the same door that Macbeth presently makes use of when he goes to kill Duncan. If Banquo did use that door, even an intelligent spectator might suppose him a fellow-conspirator. Actions, especially on the stage, speak louder than words.

Finally, an interesting illustration of this convention and in general of Shakespeare's management of location is furnished by *King Lear*, I, 2, to III, 3. All these scenes are before Gloucester's castle. The Globe edition so locates I, 2, and II, except scene 3—Edgar's soliloquy—which this edition places in a wood. But are not scenes 1 and 2 in Act III also there? To assign these scenes to a distant heath, despite such lines as III, 2, 12, "Good nuncle, in," and 63, "While I to this hard house," surely implying that the speakers are near the house where Lear's daughters are sheltered while he suffers without, is to miss an excellent dramatic contrast. Even if II, 3, is supposed to be in a wood at some distance from the castle—it need not be—Kent is all the time upon the stage in the stocks, so that the stage is really the same, and the significance of the central door need not be supposed to have changed. We may therefore picture the scene as follows: By the beginning of Act III, if the staging just described is correct, the central door is associated in the minds of the audience with Gloucester's castle. When the act begins, Kent, who may, when released from the stocks, have been still kept in custody and taken into the castle, enters either from the central door or, if really released, from one of the side doors. He exits to look for the king, say *left*; the gentleman, in that case, at the *right*. Lear, after a moment's pause, to avoid giving the impression that he has met either, enters, perhaps *right*, and Kent re-enters from the *left*, where he went out, thus showing that the scene remains the same. But Kent, having gone out with Lear at the *left*, end of scene 2, enters, scene 4, at the *right*, marking the change of scene to the exterior of the hovel, represented in this scene by the left door. Since at the end of scene 4 they return whence they came, they go out where they entered, *right*. Scenes 3 and 5, each of which is only about twenty-five lines in length, are concerned with persons at Gloucester's castle; the entrances and exits are therefore through the rear stage, either curtained or exposed. In scene 5 the curtains

are surely closed to prepare the bed or couch used by Lear in scene 6. This scene is also to be thought of as in the castle; at least I can find no evidence of the "chamber in a farmhouse" of the Globe directions. For this scene Gloucester and Lear, who in scene 4 went out *right* from before the hovel, here enter *left*. Thus throughout the first three acts the central entrance is uninterruptedly associated with the castle, and the various changes of scene are all visually indicated through this convention without much change of the stage setting.

The advantage of this convention on such a stage is its clearness and its simplicity. Fewer illustrations are to be found than would occur were the Elizabethan plays less frequently composed with double or triple plots. Of course, too, the convention is useful only when the re-entrance occurs before the audience has forgotten where the exit was made. For this reason I have neglected all illustrations which occur at an act interval. But in certain series of scenes the convention offers a considerable aid to a dramatist presenting a rapidly developing story which allows little textual reference, uses few distinctive properties in its different scenes, and changes its imagined location freely. Recognition of its existence makes a little clearer just how the problem of location presented itself to the Elizabethan dramatist, and also emphasizes once more the close connection of the Shakespearean with the mediaeval stage.

GEORGE FULLMER REYNOLDS

INDIANA UNIVERSITY